

Notes from the DOC - The College Recruitment Process

Many players have aspirations of playing collegiate soccer but do not understand the recruitment timeline, the landscape and realities of college soccer opportunities, and the work and time required by each individual player to promote themselves to coaches. This confusion is compounded by several myths about college soccer, which are perpetuated by those who are ignorant to the process.

An article from the New York Times in 2008 generated the following facts and figures about college soccer in 2003-04, the last year the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) collected this data:

Men's College Soccer

Total scholarships available: 2,357

Number of players who received some portion of an athletic scholarship: 6,047

Average percentage of a full scholarship received: 39

Average scholarship amount received: \$8,533

Percentage of high school soccer players who receive an athletic scholarship:
1.8

Women's College Soccer

Total scholarships available: 3,964

Number of players who received some portion of an athletic scholarship: 9,310

Average percentage of a full scholarship received: 43

Average scholarship amount received: \$8,304

Percentage of high school soccer players who receive an athletic scholarship:
3.4

While there are limited opportunities available – and even fewer scholarships available -- there are opportunities for players who prepare accordingly and research their options. Listed below are the steps players should take if they are interested in playing college soccer.

Step #1: Select Your Schools

Players should make a list of schools they are interested in attending based on these four variables:

1. Academic Program: if a player knows what they wish to study (business, medicine, education, etc), they should look at schools that offer that degree. If they do not know what they wish to study, a college or university with a wide array of programs should be considered.

2. Size of the School: some players may want to attend a large university, while others may want a smaller, more intimate experience.

3. Geography: the distance and location of the school is another important factor. Being far from home or being close to home is something that must be considered.

4. Atmosphere or Environment: each school has a different feel or vibe. It's important that the student feels comfortable on campus.

There is a reason why soccer is not a factor in creating this list – it's because nobody majors in "soccer" while attending school. Students must realize that college soccer is the "gravy" of the college experience; if they overemphasize it or include it as a main factor, they may suffer a negative experience.

College soccer can be taken away from a player in one of the following manners:

1. Injury: a player could suffer an injury and be unfit to play.
2. Coaching change: the coach who recruited the student is fired or quits, and the plans of the new coach may not include the student.
3. Recruiting over: often times a player is recruited for a specific position and are told they're expected to fill that role the following year. However, another player may be recruited the following year that also fills that role, which means the student has been "recruited over" and now is not receiving playing time they thought they would receive.
4. Ineligibility: players who do not maintain a high enough grade point average will not be eligible to play.

It's important for a player to want to be at the university or college they're attending, so if a negative experience with soccer occurs, their overall college experience can still be positive.

Step #2: Good Grades and Test Scores

Players should strive for high marks in High School beginning in their freshman year. Keeping their grade point average (GPA) high early on will benefit them in the recruiting process. The first question a college coach will typically ask about a recruit is whether they would be accepted into their school. If the answer is no, most coaches will not recruit the player. A player with a low GPA will have to spend extra time studying and working to increase it, and the longer it takes the less likely the opportunity they wish to pursue will be available.

The same also applies to test scores. Scoring well in the ACT and/or SAT is critical, as a student is more likely to be accepted by that institution, and is more likely to receive academic financial assistance.

Step #3: Player Resume and Cover Letter, and Highlight DVD

Each player should create a soccer-specific resume that they can update over the course of their high school years. This resume should be sent to college programs and should also include a college-specific cover letter. Samples of each are provided at the end of this document.

Having your club coach or director review both documents before sending them is encouraged, as this document may generate the first impression each college coach has of you and your coach will be able to offer another perspective on the document. For the player profile, it is suggested that players use a profile or head shot, as the college coach you send it to is more likely to connect your face with your name when/if you meet.

In addition to these documents, certain college programs have an online recruiting form available on their team's website. This recruiting form may serve as your player resume for that specific program.

It's also helpful for a player to create a highlight DVD they can send a coach, especially if that coach is unable to physically attend a player's match. This DVD should include two chapters:

1. a highlight tape of key moments and successes from multiple matches; this displays the player's complete skill sets (about 10-15 minutes)
2. one half of a recent game – this is done so the coach can see a player's performance through the course of a match (warts and all) and also because a coach typically does not have time to watch a DVD of a full match.

Step #4: Know the Rules and Variations of each Division

There are four classifications of college soccer programs in the US (examples of schools in Michigan are included):

NCAA Division 1: Michigan State University, University of Michigan, Oakland University, Eastern Michigan, Western Michigan, Central Michigan

NCAA Division 2: Northwood University, Ferris State University, Saginaw Valley State University, Grand Valley State University

NCAA Division 3: Alma College, Olivet College, Hope College, Kalamazoo College

NAIA (National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics): Spring Arbor University, Marygrove College, Madonna University, Aquinas College, Davenport University

NJCAA (National Junior College Athletic Association): Schoolcraft College, Lansing Community College, Jackson Community College

NCAA programs are more restrictive in terms of the recruiting rules that must be followed, with Division 1 programs the most restrictive. It's important to

understand that the strength of the soccer program is not directly connected to the division of governance.

NCAA Division 1 (recruiting timeline and details):

September 1 of a recruit's Sophomore year: a recruitment survey can be mailed from the university. Phone calls from recruits can be received but not returned by college coaches.

September 1 of a recruit's Junior year: a coach can communicate with a recruit via email.

July 1 of a recruit's Senior year: a coach can call a recruit.

During a potential recruit's freshmen through junior years, campus and program visits are permitted, but they are considered "unofficial" visits; all expenses associated with unofficial visits are paid for by the recruit.

During a recruit's senior year, official visits are permitted, and the university typically pays for expenses associated with that trip (food, stay in the dorm, etc).

The number of athletic scholarships available at this level for women's teams is 14 and for men's teams is 9.9. Scholarships may be given as partial or full-rides, and are annually awards (there is no such thing as a four-year scholarship).

NCAA Division 2 (recruiting timeline and details):

The major difference between NCAA D1 and D2 programs is the amount of money spent athletically, in regards to facilities, staff, scholarships awarded and other expenses.

The recruiting calendar is the same as D1, except coaches can begin calling recruits beginning on June 15 of their senior year. In addition, a one day tryout is permitted with current players in the Fall season (at D1, walk-on tryouts among potential players can occur).

The number of athletic scholarships available at this level for women's teams is 9.9 and for men's teams is 9.0. Scholarships may be given as partial or full-rides, and are annually awards (there is no such thing as a four-year scholarship).

NCAA Division 3 (recruiting timeline and details):

The major difference between D1/D2 and D3 programs is that no athletic scholarship money is available at the D3 level.

All contact – face-to-face, phone, email, etc – is permitted once a player enters high school. However, no face-to-face interactions can occur during a weekend tournament or showcase event.

Most D3 coaches begin recruiting players beginning in their junior years.

NAIA (recruiting timeline and details):

The NAIA has fewer restrictions than the NCAA, including the amount of contact a coach can have with a recruit; specifically, there are no restrictions. NAIA teams are permitted to have recruits train with their current squad, which is a great opportunity for a player to get a hands-on feel.

In addition, players can transfer from one program to another if they feel their current school is not a good fit without a loss of eligibility.

More than 90 percent of NAIA programs offer athletic scholarships. Actual athletic scholarship awards are difficult to determine, because NAIA programs do not distinguish between academic and athletic scholarships. According to the New York Times, the average women's soccer aid package (athletic and academic) in 2003-04 was \$7,442. The overall average aid package in all NAIA sports was \$6787 per student. Soccer programs can award annually up to 18 scholarships.

NJCAA (recruiting timeline and details):

The NJCAA is independent from NCAA and NAIA, and thus has separate rules and regulations. NJCAA programs are two-year institutions; many of the students who complete those two years will receive an Associates Degree and then transfer to a four-year institution to complete their degree, and may also continue playing at this new school. Junior colleges may be attractive as they offer a more local and affordable option.

Scholarships (referred to as grants-in-aid) are available depending on the division the school competes in (NJCAA Division I, II or III). Division I colleges may offer full athletic scholarships, Division II colleges are limited to awarding tuition, fees and books, and Division III institutions may provide no athletically related financial assistance.

There are no restrictions in terms of communication between a coach and a recruit at the NJCAA level. Many recruits at this level begin looking at Junior Colleges in the winter of their senior year, primarily because the options they hoped to pursue at the NCAA level are no longer available. Most coaches will recruit players in their service area, which consists of surrounding communities.

Often times, NCAA coaches will maintain dialogue with NJCAA coaches, as players they might be interested who are not eligible can continue playing and become a potential recruit at a later time. NJCAA players can transfer after any semester to a NCAA program; many players transfer after their fall semester, so they can join their NCAA team for the winter and spring seasons.

Step #5: Promote Yourself

Based on the schools on your list, your strategy to promote yourself may include the following opportunities:

Send them your game schedule: college coaches will do their best to watch potential recruits play for their club team. However, the difficulty in doing so is that there are only so many games a coach can physically attend. In addition, college coaches will try to attend matches that feature multiple recruits, so playing for a competitive team in a strong league more likely allows a coach to watch a recruit play. The geographic distance of the collegiate program also is a factor in a coach attending a recruit's match. If the game schedule is known ahead of time, include it with the resume and cover letter.

Attend a college camp or clinic: this may be the best strategy, because the recruit attends a summer camp or a one-or-two-day clinic during the summer or winter that is held on campus; this makes it easier for a player to be seen and evaluated because instead of the coach coming to the player, the player comes to the coach. The major drawback to this approach is timing and money; each camp requires money to attend and the camp must coincide with the player's availability during that time of year.

Campus visit: players interested in a particular school can schedule a campus visit, which may include a meeting with that school's soccer coach. This is an opportunity for the player and their parents to meet face-to-face with the coach.

Participate in a Showcase Tournament: a word of warning – there is much misinformation about showcase events and the benefits players have by participating in them. The idea of a showcase event is sound: teams compete in the event in front of college coaches, giving the coach an opportunity to see as many players as possible over a two-to-four-day long event.

However, a showcase event only benefits the player if:

1. the programs they're interested in (based on the four variables previously discussed) will be in attendance;
2. the coaches are interested in watching this player compete.

There is a myth that coaches at showcase events simply watch random matches, hoping to find a player that stands out. This does happen, but typically for the players on the top teams in the competition. For the majority of players, they need to first express interest in that coach's program for the coach to plan on watching their team in the event. If there are no programs in attendance that interest the player, there is little-to-no benefit in attending the showcase.

Step #6: Tricks of the Trade and Rules of the Road (misc. items to consider):

Recruiting Timelines:

It's important for players to realize that the larger Division 1 programs are actively recruiting players beginning their sophomore years. It's critical that players who have aspirations of playing at that level begin the recruiting steps early, but not to be frustrated if their communication is unanswered (recall communication restrictions discussed earlier in this document).

Verbal (unofficial) commitments are typically made at the Division 1 level during a recruit's junior year, so the longer a player waits to promote themselves the less likely an opportunity will be available. In short, the earlier players can begin this process, the better.

Parent Involvement:

Parents should assume a supportive role in this process. They can proof-read documents players prepare, and ask questions to coaches when visiting campuses but this process should be driven by the player because coaches are looking for self-driven and motivated individuals. When the player arrives on campus as a student-athlete, parental involvement during that time is minimal at best.

Coaches look for qualities in a recruit that will lead them to success as a student-athlete, and an over-involved parent is a red-flag for coaches. All communication between family and program should be sent by the player.

Recruiting Services:

There are numerous recruiting services that for a fee will guide players through the recruiting process and will promote players to college soccer programs. There are benefits and detriments to this approach:

Major benefit: the recruiting service may put together your resume, cover letter and DVD for you, and will distribute these items to multiple college programs – potentially hundreds of programs nationwide. This casts a much wider net for players seeking to compete at the collegiate level. This is especially beneficial to

smaller programs (mainly Division 3 schools), who do not have the resources available to scout and recruit to the same level as more well-funded programs.

Major detriment: there is no guarantee that the schools being contacted are:

- a. interested in the player;
- b. able to accept the player academically; and
- c. of interest to the player (based on the four variables previously discussed).

Some college coaches may be turned off by the impersonal feel of a player represented by a recruiting service; since these services contact hundreds of programs nationwide, a college coach may not be certain how interested the player actually is in their program, and may decide to focus their attention on recruiting players who have not used a service, since the effort made to contact the school is done personally by that player.

CONCLUSION:

Players who follow this “road map” of recruiting and start this process early will be much more likely to find a college soccer program than those who stray from these steps and/or start late. It’s important that players keep soccer in perspective, and find a collegiate program that satisfies them academically above all else.